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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [VT](#) [KU](#) [ISLAMISTS](#)
SUBJECT: CONTINUED ANGER OVER POPE'S COMMENTS; ISLAMISTS
USE CONTROVERSY FOR POLITICAL GAIN

REF: KUWAIT 3717

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Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reason 1.4 (d)

1. (C/NF) Summary: The furor over the Pope's comments has continued unabated in Kuwait, fanned by some conservative Islamists' depiction of the comments as further evidence of a Judeo-Christian conspiracy against Islam. The subject has dominated editorials over the past week with almost all authors condemning the Pope's remarks and dismissing his "apology" as insufficient. Aside from the comments of the Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (reftel), there has been no official statement by the Government condemning the Pope's comments, though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did summon the Vatican Nuncio this week to "clarify" the Pope's remarks. There have been isolated calls to stop the building of churches in Kuwait, but no one has advocated violence or retaliation against Christians. An American Imam in Kuwait on a U.S. Speaker program expressed empathy with Muslim feelings, but called on fellow Muslims to accept the Pope's apology and use this as a spur for increased interfaith dialogue. Prominent Kuwaitis held rallies, some of which were attended by MPs, in which they denounced the Pope in extremely harsh language. End Summary.

Pope's Comments Connected to "Crusade"

2. (C/NF) In a September 20 article in Al-Rai Al-Aam (local Arabic daily), Ali Al-Fadhel linked President Bush's 2001 reference to the War on Terrorism as a "crusade," his recent statement that "this is at war with Islamic fascists," the controversial cartoons of Prophet Mohammed published in Denmark, and the Pope's comments. This connection was made by a number of other columnists, including liberals like Ahmed Deyain, the former Secretary General of the Kuwait Democratic Forum. In a September 17 article in Al-Rai Al-Aam, Deyain argued that certain "gangs of neo-conservatives in the West are striving to depict Muslims including nonreligious ones as strategic foes of Western civilization and eventually project Islam as the foe of the West." "Are the European nations supported by (the Pope) currently involved in waging a crusader war on Islam?" columnist Ahmed Al-Kous asked in a September 17 article in Al-Watan (local Arabic daily). He concluded that the Pope's "accusations...reflect a deep-rooted grudge among extremist Christians against Islam and Muslims attributable to the spread of Islam in many countries." Another columnist, Waleed Al-Ghanem, claimed "this slander has been issued intentionally" to "undermine" the image of Islam and the Prophet Mohammed, in a September 20 article in Al-Qabas

(local Arabic daily).

13. (C/NF) Many columnists also dismissed the Pope's "apology" as falling short of what is needed. "The 'sadness' shown by the Pope is just an attempt to reformulate what had already been said by the Pope and in no way constitutes a denial or repentance," columnist and professor Dr. Ayed Al-Manna argued in a September 19 article in Al-Watan. Despite their criticisms, most Kuwaitis have urged a non-violent response to the Pope's statements and stressed the need for greater dialogue between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Dr. Al-Mana, for example, called for a "deep-rooted Muslim-Christian dialogue on the issues and most important difference between the two religions."

Controversy Also Sparks Degree of Soul-Searching

14. (C/NF) Not all Kuwaitis were quick to condemn the Pope. In a September 20 article in the Kuwait Times (local English daily), Dr. Sami Alrabaa, a staunch liberal, argued that the Pope's comments were taken out of context and asked why Islam could be so easily misrepresented. Responding to an article by Ali Fahd Al-Ajmi, who alleged that the West was fighting a "crusade" against the Muslim world, Alrabaa said the only reason the world would have to "hate" Muslims is "because most terrorists are Muslims, terrorizing the world." He continued: "They hate us because we are killing innocent people in the name of Islam. They hate us because we are intolerant and undemocratic. They hate us because we protest like savage animals; burning embassies and churches. They surely do not hate us just because we are Muslims. As ordinary Muslims, we do not pose any threat to anybody and hence nobody hates us."

15. (C/NF) Khalil Ali Haider, a Shi'a intellectual and columnist for Al-Watan, told Poloff September 19 that

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conservative Islamists were using the controversy over the Pope's comments for their own political gain. He feared the ramification would be the loss of freedoms of speech in western countries. "Given this backlash, people will be afraid to say anything even mildly critical of the Muslim world," he said. Ultimately, this will undermine dialogue and understanding between the Muslim world and the West. Haider expressed disappointment that the Pope had not distinguished between "Islam" and "political Islam." "You can say anything you want against the latter," he said, "but the former is sacred." Craig Walker, an American Muslim hired by the Ministry of Awqaf as a consultant on a project aimed at improving the image of Islam in the West, told Poloff he believed the controversy would have a positive outcome by inspiring greater dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Visiting American Imam Responds

16. (SBU) Sohaib Sultan, an American Imam visiting Kuwait on a U.S. Speaker program, told Poloff the first question he was usually asked in Kuwait, by a wide range of Kuwaitis, was what he thought of the Pope's comments. Kuwaitis have told Sultan they are particularly disappointed because they saw the previous Pope as a person dedicated to interfaith dialogue. Sultan has responded that religious leaders should choose their words carefully and that Muslims regret the Pope's choice of words. However, he has also told Kuwaitis that Muslims should accept the Pope's apology and take advantage of this opportunity to improve the dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

Islamists See an Opportunity for Political Gain

17. (C/NF) A number of conservative Islamists seem to be

using the controversy for political gain by situating the Pope's comments in the context of a Judeo-Christian conspiracy against Islam. One of the most strongly worded responses came from former Salafi Member of Parliament (MP) Dr. Fahad Al-Khanna who wrote in a September 17 article in Al-Watan, "It looks like (the Pope) has decided to throw his weight behind a hectic campaign which has been waged by ruling extremist rightist parties and parliaments in the West, including the U.S., Germany, and Austria against Islam.

The campaign in question was actually motivated by political factors aimed at instigating the people against Islam in the name of fighting terrorism. We conclude the Jews and the rightist Christians are in agreement about their specific objectives while dealing with Muslim countries: re-imperialize these countries and eventually divide them...erect barriers of hatred and fear between the West and the Muslim world to prevent the spread of Islam in the West...spread Christianity in the world...(and) fight Islam and expel Muslims from many nations....In light of the above, we expect the arrival of a new crusader whose armies and banners the Muslim nation must confront by all means." Despite their rhetoric, Kuwaiti Islamists have stressed that opposition to the Pope's comments should only be expressed through peaceful means; none have publicly encouraged Muslims to retaliate against Christians in any way.

18. (C/NF) Islamist groups have organized several rallies over the past few days to condemn the Pope's comments. According to local media reports, one rally organized by the Salafi Movement was attended by "dozens of Islamists," including several MPs. Acting National Assembly Speaker Mohammed Al-Bousairi, a member of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), said the Pope's "apology" was "not sufficient" and demanded that he make "an official apology." Islamist MP Dr. Waleed Al-Tabtabaei echoed previous calls by Islamist MPs (reftel) for the Government to stop issuing licenses to new churches in Kuwait and called for the expulsion of the Vatican Nuncio. Another speaker at the rally, academic Raed Al-Salih, insisted that Islam is a religion of "peace, mercy, and wisdom" and emphasized that "there is no compulsion in religion." He said, "We must protest against any attempt to tarnish the image of Islam by anyone, but it should not be carried out through extreme actions. We must remember the teachings of the Prophet who said that all religions must be respected."

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LeBaron